



THE SUBTLETY OF SILENCE: UNDERSTANDING MORDECHAI'S MOTIVATIONAL CHARGE

One of the greatest motivators toward action is the conviction that if we don't act, no one else will, and that success rests entirely upon our shoulders. Chazal teach precisely this in *Pirkei Avos* (2:5): “*B'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadel lihiyos ish* — in a place where there are no people [to take action], strive to be that person.”

And yet at one of the most critical moments in the Megillah's story, Mordechai seems to take a very different approach. When Esther learns of the fate of her people and still hesitates to approach the king, Mordechai is tasked with convincing Esther to move on their behalf. It would be the perfect opportunity to

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invoke Chazal's dictum of “*b'makom she'ein anashim*” (anachronistically, of course) and inspire Esther by reminding her that the entire fate of the Jewish people rests on her shoulders. What choice does she have? Yet, Mordechai takes the opposite approach:

כי אם-החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת--רוח
והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר ואת ובית-
אביך תאבדו; ומי יודע אם-לעת קזאת הנעת
למלכות.

For if you remain silent at this time, relief

and rescue will arise for the Jews from elsewhere, and you and your father's household will perish; and who knows whether you arrived at royalty for this very moment?

Esther 4:14

The speech feels woefully inadequate and uninspiring. Why would Esther feel compelled to risk her life when salvation would come either way? Doesn't that render any potential action utterly meaningless? Yet somehow, it works. Esther acts. What was Mordechai trying to convey and what ultimately inspired Esther to take charge?

We may need to reimagine what Mordechai really intends to convey

R. Shlomo Alkabetz on Mordechai's Argument to Esther

ואמר מי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות כי ממך ומינך תקח הראייה שעלית למדרגת המלוכה פתאום שלא כנוהג העולם שאינם עולים למדרגה כזאת אלא בהדרגה ואת לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות בהשגחה פרטית כמו ליוסף הצדיק וכן ג"כ יהיה לישראל ריוח והצלה פתאום ממקום אחר ... ופירוש ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת להראותך כה ההשגחה הפתאומית הגעת למלכות.

He said, "Who knows if you attained the crown for a moment like this?" Because from your experience you should know. You rose to royalty instantly, not like the natural rise to royalty, which involves many steps. You rose to a moment like this through Divine providence just like Yosef HaTzaddik, and the same will be true of the Jewish people — success and salvation will come suddenly from another place ... The explanation of "Who knows if you attained the crown for a moment like this?" is to teach you the power of Divine providence that enabled you to attain royalty instantly.

Manot HaLevi 4:14

with this speech, and it starts with an insight I learned from my *rebbe*, R. David Fohrman, regarding the particular language that Mordechai invokes. "*Hachareish tacharishi*" ([For if] you remain silent) is quite a peculiar phrase. That particular formulation — the tense (*hiphil*), together with the double language — appears but one other time in all of Tanakh.

While discussing the laws of vows, the Torah says that when a married woman makes a vow, "*ishah yikimenu*

v'ishah yifeirenu — her husband can either affirm or annul it" (Bamidbar 30:14). Both of those verbs — affirmation and nullification — are *active*. But what if the husband does neither? What if he hears the vow but doesn't actively affirm or annul?

ואם-הִחָרַשׁ יְחָרִישׁ לָהּ אִישָׁהּ מִיּוֹם אֶל-יּוֹם וְהָקִים אֶת-כָּל-נְדָרֶיהָ אוֹ אֶת-כָּל-אֲסָרֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר עָלְיָהּ הַקִּים אֹתָם, כִּי-הִחָרַשׁ לָהּ בְּיוֹם שָׁמְעוּ.

But if her husband is altogether silent from day to day, then he causes all her vows to stand, or all her bonds which are upon her — he has let them stand, because he held his peace at her in the day that he heard them.

Bamidbar 30:15

The Torah adamantly argues that there is no third option at all. Silence is tacit agreement.¹ Indeed, the S'forno on this *pasuk* says precisely this:

שהשתיקה במי שיש בידו למחות היא כמו הודאה שהשותק הוא כמסכים במה שנעשה. *Silence by one who has the ability to protest is akin to agreement, for one who is silent is as one who agrees with that which was done.*

This double language of "*hachareish tacharishi*," then, is what we might call a "deafening silence." Willful stillness when one could, conceivably, speak up is not abstention but a screaming affirmation. In fact, the grammatical tense of these words — *hiphil*, which is often used to portray causation in active voice — points to exactly this idea. Yes, silence is technically passive, but in many cases, it is akin to active choice.

With all this in mind, let's return to Mordechai's speech. By borrowing the language of "*hachareish tacharishi*" from the parshah of *nedarim*, Mordechai was appealing not to Esther's leadership or the community's dependence on her,

but to her moral responsibility. Was salvation dependent on Esther? Perhaps not. God certainly didn't *need* Esther. But that's neither here nor there. Mordechai was saying: "Esther, now that you know of Haman's plan and you have the opportunity to act, there are only two options: You can affirm Haman's plan, or you can stand up against it. And '*im hachareish tacharishi*' — if you remain silent, it's — in the words of the S'forno — *k'maskim b'mah shena'aseh* — as if you agree with it." As R. Aharon Lichtenstein puts it, "Esther must make her fateful choice: Do I care or don't I?" (*By His Light*).

This approach clarifies two other strange elements of the Megilah's story. First, Mordechai's speech has yet another ostensibly uninspiring line: If you don't act, salvation will come from somewhere else, "*v'at u'beis avicha toveidun* — you and your father's household will perish." Why would that be true? Granted, lack of action would not have been ideal, but if salvation of the Jewish nation were to come, why would Esther and her family — proud, card-carrying members of the Jewish nation — not be included in that *yeshuah*? But when the lens gets shifted from communal dependence to moral responsibility, it makes perfect sense: If Esther were to remain silent and thereby affirm the genocidal plan, she would remove herself from the Jewish camp and firmly place herself in Haman's. Naturally, she would become susceptible to suffering precisely Haman's fate — which, as the Megilah describes, was the downfall of him and his household. It's not a punishment but a natural consequence.

Second, the very name of the holiday might well point exactly to

this newfound understanding of Mordechai's approach. We generally understand Purim to be from the word "pur," lots, just as the Megilah itself expresses (9:26). But there may be a double meaning here. Back in Bamidbar, the verb used for "annul" (of a vow) is "hefer" (הפּר). The Radak, R. Dovid Kimchi, in his *Sefer HaShorashim*, writes that the root of *hefer* is "פור". Then, remarkably, he writes that Purim ("פורים") comes from precisely the same root. In other words, Purim may not only be referring to Haman's tool of destruction, but to Esther's courageous decision *not* to remain silent, to actively annul Haman's decree.²

This whole approach, it seems to me, is reminiscent of — or, more precisely, the precursor to — a fascinating insight of R. Bachya ibn Paquda in *Chovos HaLevavos* (*Sha'ar Avodas Ha'Elokim*, 4). There, he notes that we generally divide human activity into three categories: required (things we must do), prohibited (things we cannot do), or permissible (things we are allowed but not required to do). But R. Bachya points out that this third category is actually a phantom category. In truth, there is nothing that we're simply "allowed" to do. For every "reshus," we must deeply

consider whether we should or should not be doing that particular thing in that moment. And that process is complex and far from clear-cut; there are countless factors to consider — timing, context, people, and more. Ultimately, if we decide that it would be best to do that thing, it leaves the realm of "allowed" and enters the realm of "must." And if we decide that it's best *not* to do it, then it is "prohibited." I don't believe R. Bachya means that those permissible things are actually *legally* required or prohibited, but, just as Mordechai reminded Esther, every potential to act has complexity and both acting and choosing not act are active moral decisions.

Of course, life is not black and white, and I spend a tremendous amount of time teaching my students to think in more nuanced and less binary models. Still, Mordechai is teaching two profound lessons that deeply reverberate with me and challenge me to take real pause as I encounter subtlety in the world. First, abstention where there is an opportunity to intervene, in many cases, serves as implicit affirmation — and we are responsible for those decisions. And, when we feel that we should not or cannot act, we must ask ourselves, in

the words of R. Aharon, "How much of our resignation is motivated by supposed 'inability' and how much is a result of the fact that our concern simply doesn't run deep enough?" Second, when it comes to moral development, the real challenge is to be able to see nuance and subtlety — to notice the challenges and merits of various positions all at once — and to still have the wisdom and clarity to make difficult decisions. I don't mean to argue that Haman's genocidal decree had nuance, but that the situation in which Esther found herself was replete with complexity — and, ultimately, her ability to choose instead of passively observe made her the catalyst of Jewish survival.

Endnotes

1. Based on the pasuk's language of "*miyom el yom*," this period — when silence turns into affirmation — seems to be once that day passes and nightfall arrives (Rashi, conclusion of *Nedarim* 76b).
2. At least two factors contribute to justifying a second meaning of "Purim" beyond Haman's lots: First, it is quite strange to name a holiday after the tool that would have been the nation's end. Second, a close reading of the Megilah's description of the holiday's name implies that Esther's action and God's salvation (9:25) also contributed to the holiday's name, in addition to the lots themselves (9:24).

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